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SENSITIVITY RETRAINING

Regrouping with Alison Krauss, Union Station members 'tame the music back a little'

By Walter Tunis

Contributing Music Writer

Is playing in a bluegrass band — albeit, a progressive, platinum-selling, multi-Grammy-winning bluegrass band — akin to riding a bicycle? If you spend extended time away from your mates, will you rediscover that ensemble magic you are known for when the time comes to regroup? Will you still know how to ride?

That might have been on the minds of Alison Krauss and the members of her longstanding acoustic music troupe, Union Station, when work began on their most recent recording, *Paper Airplane*. After touring duties were completed for their last album, 2004's *Lonely Runs Both Ways*, Krauss cut the T Bone Burnett-produced *Raising Sand* with Robert Plant. Union Station guitarist and co-vocalist Dan Tyminski used the period to work with his own, more traditional bluegrass band. And dobro great Jerry Douglas, a 15-year veteran of Union Station and one-time Lexingtonian, toured with Elvis Costello as well as with a roots/fusion combo that included the celebrated jazz drummer Omar Hakim and bassist Viktor Krauss, Alison's brother.

"We did bring something back to Union Station that wasn't there before," Douglas said. "But from the first song we played together, there was still that sound. It was the sound we had left two years before. It was those people. It was the way Dan plays rhythm. It was the way Barry (Bales) plays the bass. It was Alison's singing. It was the way I try to frame her in. All those tones were there. But there was some extra stuff, too.



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Allison Krauss and Union Station are Jerry Douglas, left, Barry Bales, Krauss, Ron Block and Dan Tyminski.

"There was some extra sensibility that may not have been there before. I know I came back a little harder-edged compared to when I had left. It was sort of like during the time we didn't play with Alison and weren't doing the sensitive direction. If there was any adjustment at all when we came back, it was to bring everything back down — you know, tame the music back a little bit, but holding that power in reserve."

The only problem in getting *Paper Airplane* off the ground had nothing to do with music. During early studio sessions, Krauss was beset with debilitating migraine headaches that, for a time, shut down work on the album entirely. The headaches eventually required hospitalization for treatment.

"It was really awful for her," Douglas said. "These were literally blinding kinds

of headaches that would just stop you in your tracks. It became hard for her to even be objective about anything. Her head hurt so bad she couldn't even think."

When Krauss's head literally cleared, recording resumed on a set of songs borrowed from bluegrass pioneers both established (Tim O'Brien, Peter Rowan) and comparatively new (Crooked Still's Aoife O'Donovan), folk-based veterans (Richard Thompson, Jackson Browne), gospel stylists (Sidney Cox) and even Union Station's own ranks (bassist Bales).

One tune cut during the sessions that Douglas was especially fond of was a composition by Nashville songsmiths Jeff Black and Jon Randall Stewart called *Frozen Fields*. Its arrangement placed the whispery delicacy of Krauss' singing side by

side with the wiry ingenuity of Douglas' playing. The tune didn't make *Paper Airplane's* final 11-song cut.

But Douglas knew what to do with it. He was already in the planning stages for a new solo album, *Traveler*, that was going to enlist many of the musical friends Douglas had produced, recorded and toured with outside of Union Station — Eric Clapton, Mumford and Sons, Paul Simon, Keb' Mo', Béla Fleck, Sam Bush and Del McCoury. He figured why not include *Frozen Fields* and, in essence, invite Union Station into his solo career?

"I was sort of crushed when *Frozen Fields* didn't make it onto *Paper Airplane*," Douglas said. "But at the same time, a bell went off in my head. It was like, 'I know what we can do with that one.' I never had all of Union Station on one of my records, so the song fit into the

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whole picture perfectly."

An alumnus of the famed mid-'70s lineup of J.D. Crowe's band New South, Douglas, 56, became a highly sought-after studio musician throughout the '70s, '80s and '90s. He also produced recordings for Krauss long before he joined Union Station. But his actual membership in the band was initially designed as a temporary stay.

"I came into the band to play for the summer. Two weeks into it, they asked me if I would just become a permanent part of it. And I was ready at that point. That was in '98. I was really ready because I was burned out doing three sessions a day in Nashville playing on country records and whatever came through the door that day. It was perfect timing, a good place for me to jump off and be in a working band, in a situation where we all worked together.

"It was like the sum of the parts. That's what you get with this band. We've got this great voice out there and all of this powerful musicianship to back it up. So it's really a dream band. A lot of people would love to be in a situation like this."

Read Walter Tunis' blog, The Musical Box, at LexGo.com.